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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KHARTOUM 000388

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FOR AF/SPG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [MARR](#) [MPOS](#) [SU](#)
SUBJECT: VIEWS ON MARCH 1 BORDER SKIRMISHES FROM SOUTH OF
THE BORDER

REF: A. KHARTOUM 308

[1](#)B. HOTR IIR 6 890 0155 08
[1](#)C. KHARTOUM 328

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Alberto M. Fernandez. Reasons 1.4 (b,d
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[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Discussions with senior UN and UNMIS officials in Juba and Aweil, in addition to follow-on discussions with various elements of the SPLA, place March 1 skirmishes not in the disputed region of Abyei but south of the Kiir River near Rumaker, Northern Bahr el Ghazal state. UNMIS officials in Aweil point to growing SPLA tensions with SAF or SAF-aligned forces as the cause of not only December-January skirmishes, but also "SAF border probes" dating to October 2007 that occurred amidst senior-level discussions on redeployment at both the Khartoum and Juba level. This leads Post to conclude that a series of incidents have occurred (and are likely to continue) along the South Darfur/Southern Kordofan/Northern Bahr el Ghazal borders. Movement by both armies appears to show that both sides are attempting to carve out resource-rich territory on either side of the 1956 border. Both the SPLA and SAF are using military pressure to affect resolution of the Abyei impasse. END SUMMARY.

UN ASSERTS MARCH 1 VIOLENCE OCCURRED IN SOUTH

[1](#)2. (C) Aweil's UN Resident Coordinator (RC) Mohammed Khan told ConGen PolOff on March 6 that "he was absolutely certain" that the March 1 skirmishes (REFTEL) between SPLA and SAF-supported popular defense forces occurred in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state near the village of Rumaker, about 50 kilometers south of the River Kiir in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state (NBEG). (NOTE: The Kiir River is also known as the Bahr el Arab. END NOTE.) Military observers from the UNMIS Aweil Team Site showed ConGen PolOff their maps on which they have plotted incidents within NBEG and the region. The March 1 incident dips well below what is the currently-accepted as the 1956 border. UNMIS RC and Milobs detailed to PolOff accounts relayed to them - by Rumaker residents and by transiting traders - of repeated attacks by heavily-armed "muhajadeen" against SPLA positions around Rumaker. UNMIS Civil Affairs Chief Samantha Barnes told PolOff on March 4 that UN DSS believes that at least 70 PDF members had been killed, and a "well-equipped force of at least 1,000" took part in the attacks. UN DSS personnel traveled with Poloff to Aweil and then onwards to Rumaker for a site assessment that day. Briefing Poloff on the return flight to Juba, UN DSS personnel commented "a gun-mounted truck is a fairly remarkable acquisition for a Misseriya herdsman." Pressed as to whether he believed Misseriya tribesmen were behind the March 1 attacks, he expressed his view that ethnic Misseriya

allegedly accepting monetary inducement to enlist hardly warranted "the herdsman moniker." "These were not provoked shepherds," he stressed, "this was PDF." SPLA sources told ConGen staff that they had seized 5 SAF prisoners during the March 1 NBEG raids, and intended to raise this issue at the next Joint Defense Board meeting.

SPLA ACTIONS BELIEVE WORDS -- TO A DEGREE

13. (C) Post notes that SPLA Chief of Staff Oyai Deng Ajak told ConGen staff March 1 that the SPLA had been attacked by SAF-supported PDF forces at three positions along the River Kiir (Ref A). Juba-based sources told ConGen Defense Liaison Officer that the SPLA had positioned at least one "screening element" north of the river in what is Southern Kordofan. Similar reports also place a second SPLA unit near Grinti south of the Kiir, but straddling the NBEG border. (Ref B). It is entirely possible that SPLA/Misseriya skirmishes attributed to "undisciplined" SPLA could have been initiated by this northern-most unit in response to infiltration by SAF-supported PDF forces southward into NBEG. UNMIS RCs in Aweil and Juba have no reports from UNMIS RC Abyei that corroborate March 3 media accounts about offensive operations by the SPLA, nor does UN DSS/Juba.

14. (C) SPLA U.S. Liaison Officer Colonel Dut Paul Garang told ConGen PolOff March 5 that Major General Piang had "traveled to the front" on March 3 to meet with SPLA units "around" the Kiir River. ConGen PolOff confirmed in discussions with NBEG Security Director and NBEG Deputy Governor on March 7 that Piang had presided over state-level security meetings in Aweil, had met with the SPLA's 15th Brigade in Winjik (NBEG), and had traveled to the towns of Majok Yienthiu (NBEG), and

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Abyei. USG-contract military advisors told PolOff March 5 that Piang's travel was linked to March 1 concerns voiced by SPLA Chief of Staff Oyai Deng Ajak about what Ajak termed "a marked decline in intelligence gathering" by SPLA forces along the 1956 border. (COMMENT: Piang's duties within the SPLA include operations and training -- making assertions of a discipline problem (Ref C) or possibly the need for updated marching orders to SPLA units (related to observation and reporting) equally plausible. END NOTE.)

NBEG PERSPECTIVE ON CLASHES PAST AND PRESENT

15. (C) RC Khan reviewed October-February PDF and SPLA movements in the NBEG border region, noting that there was direct SAF-SPLA conflict on October 10, 2007 following provocation by SAF military assigned to a garrison outside of Majok Yienthiu. One hundred SAF had moved out of the garrison and, according to Khan, attacked an SPLA unit moving westward across Majok Yienthiu toward Rumaker. That incident and the ensuing violence led to road closures from Malualkon to Warawar and Rumaker northwards to the border by the SPLA. (COMMENT: This meant the Aweil-Meriem highway was blocked from the South by the SPLA and from the North by SAF-back PDF, isolating Abyei and NBEG from goods and services. END COMMENT). Khan maintains that the road closures were meant not to put restive tensions into check but rather to shroud SPLA activities along the border region.

16. (C) According to Khan, UNMIS/Juba chief David Gressly raised access issues on behalf of WFP and other UN humanitarian agencies with the NBEG Governor in mid-January. The Governor flatly refused to permit UN access to the northeast corner of NBEG state, claiming "the SPLA is open and transparent with you, and then suffers the consequences of attacks by well-informed SAF. Yet when SAF restricts your movement around Abyei, there are no complaints, and Khartoum suffers no consequences. We are tired of being punished for

being the only group that adheres to the rules." Queried as to whether recent redeployment by SAF out of NBEG has improved the SPLA's outlook, Khan laughed. "Those barracks over there -- they are full of SAF, and their numbers grow each evening. That means the SPLA (present only as part of the JIU) is outnumbered two-to-one in their own state capital!" (COMMENT: This is similar to descriptions of SAF presence in Bentiu (Unity State), Renk and Malakal (Upper Nile state) where GOSS and SPLA officials have alleged that SAF have merely retreated-in-place into civilian life by shedding their uniforms (and keeping their weapons) rather than affecting full redeployment northward. These SAF are supposedly ready to take up their arms when necessary. END COMMENT).

NBEG PERSPECTIVES ON ABYEI REGION VIOLENCE

17. (C) Aweil Peace Commissioner Lino Adub, recently returned from Muglad, similarly reviewed for ConGen PolOff SAF and SAF-aligned PDF movements within Southern Kordofan state following the SPLM's December 2007 appointment of Edward Lino as the party's interim administrator for Abyei. According to Adub, Misseriya clashed with Southern Sudan Police Services (SSPS) in Ariik, south of Abyei town. (NOTE: Demobilized SPLA and SPLA aligned militias were placed into the SSPS in the Spring of 2006. SSPS presence in the Abyei environs technically violates the CPA, as the South's police force does not have jurisdiction in Southern Kordofan state. END NOTE.) Regional tensions simmered through February 7, when the SPLA-escorted convoy of the Commissioner of Abiemnon came under fire from a passing convoy of SAF. The ensuing gun battle, which resulted in forces taking offensive positions on opposite sides of the roadway and saw a dozen dead and twenty-plus wounded. Adub claims that following the fire fight SAF bribed Misseriya to close the roadways. Blockades of road North of Abyei town leading into Muglad were in place by February 8. On February 9, despite the presence of a joint investigating committee on the same road, Misseriya militia attacked a commercial bus traveling past the site of the February 7 skirmish, resulting in the death of seven passengers. Dinka residents fearing repercussions moved temporarily from Abyei to (formerly SPLA-controlled) Agok, and on February 12 the largely Misseriya security committee met in Diffa and invited SPLA General Valentino (engaged in Ngo Dinka-Misseriya shuttle diplomacy since late January) to participate in the meeting. Simultaneously, Ngok Dinka and Misseriya leaders met in Abyei town and held discussions which resulted in the subsequent shaky peace pact that still holds to this day. Adub noted that the peace pact calls for

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an agreement to stop road blockades impacting the Abyei region, commits the parties to a joint investigation of the February 7 incident, and establishes a joint dispute resolution mechanism to limit the outbreak of future conflict at the tribal level. As NBEG Peace Commissioner, Adub and his Unity State counterpart will have observer status at subsequent Misseriya/Ngok Dinka discussions.

COMMENT

18. (C) While at least one chapter of the March 1 attacks has been verified as occurring in the South, therefore making it unlikely that the SPLA were the aggressors, the nuances are important. Post has reported that the SPLA took company-sized units from other locations throughout the South and deployed them (to division-sized strength) at points along the 1956 border. SPLA observers assert this is chiefly to hide SPLA redeployment, and we are inclined to believe them. Both sides are maneuvering and cheating but the SAF has been much more brazen, with overt SAF incursions into Upper Nile in the winter of 2007, gun-mounted truck supported "Misseriya"

incursions into the South in December/January, and SAF-instigated violence in Northern Bahr el Ghazal in both October 2007 and March 2008. More recent reliance by the SAF on predominantly-Misseriya PDF suggests a return by Khartoum to its well-worn strategy of divide and conquer through the spread of fear and distrust among the inhabitants of the Abyei region and the North/South border area more broadly. We note, however, that while the SPLA claims to have recovered SAF insignia and ID cards from the dead, there is no external mechanism through which to verify "Misseriya herdsman" versus PDF militiamen who happen to be Misseriya.

19. (C) COMMENT CON'T: Motivation for recent SAF-assisted attacks remains a question. Two theories circulate within diplomatic circles: probing of SPLA strength along the North/South border or a (perhaps mutual) attempt to establish the 1956 border through military might. The Bahr el Ghazal region and western areas of Southern Kordofan are rich in mineral deposits. Continued lack of clarity regarding border demarcation for troops on either side of the North/South border has given both parties ample leeway to argue that they are justified in maintaining their present positions. This argues for the urgent deployment of formed and functional JIUs to the area, enhanced UNMIS oversight and unfettered access for border demarcation -- both of which are long overdue.
FERNANDEZ